

(I Want to Know) Where Are You Tonight by osaki_nana_707

Series: [dads!Harringrove](#) [2]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Gen, M/M

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Original Characters, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-02-24

Updated: 2018-02-24

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:13:56

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,493

Publisher: [archiveofourown.org](#)

Summary:

For the last three nights Katie's been there for dinner. Her dad's working late, or at least that's what Katie has parroted the one time Steve asked. He doesn't know what Billy does for a living, but apparently he's got some long hours. He usually rolls up in his Camaro at about seven, just as the girls are starting to wind down. He doesn't come inside, just honks his horn out in the driveway and Katie gets her backpack and leaves.

Steve is... a little pissed off about it, if he's being honest.

(I Want to Know) Where Are You Tonight

Author's Note:

Part two of an ongoing series. I just can't help myself. Kudos for [justakidfromhellskitchen](#) for encouraging this tomfoolery lol

Please read the first story before this one or some things may not make sense.

(I Want to Know) Where Are You Tonight

Hannah's favorite movie is *Dirty Dancing*.

Steve gets some shit for it by other parents, given the adult themes, but Disney just doesn't seem to hold her interest. Besides, she doesn't seem bothered about the parts she doesn't understand. She likes to put on her cassette of the soundtrack so that she can be Jennifer Grey and Steve can be Patrick Swayze and he'll lift her up in the air at the right part of "(I've Had) The Time of My Life", so Steve doesn't care. He loves her little laugh when he's holding her towards the ceiling, holding her arms and legs as straight as she can, her face lit with delight. Hannah likes Baby because they both have large noses, and she begs Steve to do her hair like Baby's every morning. Steve loves doing hair, so of course he does it.

He'll listen to that soundtrack on repeat in his car for the rest of his life, and he doesn't mind if it means he can hear Hannah enthusiastically sing along.

It's just a little odd that now it's *two* little girls' voices he's hearing in his backseat the last few days.

Katie Hargrove has been hitching a ride back to the Harrington house because *Daddy's at work*. Hannah hadn't exactly asked Steve if she could come home with them, but Steve isn't about to leave the little girl alone. She's a little bitty thing, cherubic with her blonde curls and soft features. Steve's always been a protective type, so he can't

really help himself. Besides, Billy knows where to find her.

Hannah and Katie are inseparable at school, completely devoted to one another. Katie's favorite song is "Going to California" by Led Zeppelin so that's Hannah's favorite song too. Hannah's favorite movie is *Dirty Dancing* so now it's also Katie's favorite.

He glances at them in the rearview mirror of his car as he waits at a red light. Rain is pattering on the windshield, but neither of them seem dampened by the weather. Hannah's "Baby" hair is poofing from the humidity and there's mud on Katie's Doc Martens, but they're both singing, "*Hey, hey, hey baby! I wanna know if you'll be my girl!*"

It's the lightest Steve's felt in days, listening to them. The weather has been dour for days, a constant drizzle that has left Hawkins in puddles and misery. The thunderstorms that have rolled through the last few nights have left Steve a nervous mess. It's not the noise, though it certainly doesn't help; it's the flickering lights that leave his body thinking something is coming and make him stay up. Hannah's slept next to him, her head pillowed on his lap and her stuffed bunny tucked under his arm, and he's watched infomercials until dawn with a baseball bat sitting between his bedside table and his bed. It happens often enough that Hannah is unaffected.

"Hey, Harrington," Katie pipes up from the backseat. She learned to call him that from her dad, and God, she sounds *just like him* when she does it too. Same inflection and everything. He doesn't know why she can't call him *Mr. Harrington* like Hannah's other classmates, or at least just *Steve*. It makes him feel all weird when she calls him Harrington, but he can't do anything about it. "What are you making for dinner tonight?"

For the last three nights Katie's been there for dinner. Her dad's working late, or at least that's what Katie has parroted the one time Steve asked. He doesn't know what Billy does for a living, but apparently he's got some long hours. He usually rolls up in his Camaro at about seven, just as the girls are starting to wind down. He doesn't come inside, just honks his horn out in the driveway and Katie gets her backpack and leaves.

Steve is... a little pissed off about it, if he's being honest.

He's pissed about it because, for starters, Billy kissed him in the Camaro on Parents' Day and has proceeded to basically not speak to him since then. Billy would deny it from dawn to dusk, but he is absolutely avoiding him. *Absolutely.*

...and it's not like Steve doesn't get it, okay? He's gone through this shit (sort of). He had his big gay panic in college the first time he hooked up with a guy, wondered if it cancelled out all of his relationships with women up to that point. It took a few months of experimenting before he figured out that liking both was a thing and that he was, in fact, bisexual. He kept it quiet, of course, still did to this day, but it wasn't out of any sort of shame. It was just no one's business but his. Billy Hargrove's big gay panic might just be happening now, and he needs some time to deal with that, and Steve understands, really, he does...

...but Katie is fucking *wild*.

She's not a bad kid. She curses a little more than she should (which is to say is more than 'not at all'), but she is immeasurably kind. Steve suspects she doesn't actually give a shit about *Dirty Dancing*, but she watches it with Hannah after school every day. She tells Hannah that she's prettier than Baby, and it's clear that she means it. She lets Hannah have the biggest piece of chocolate cake when Steve makes one.

Katie also likes to climb furniture. She's constantly on the countertops, getting things out of cabinets she can't reach. She turns the volume on the television up too loud. She runs *everywhere*. Hannah follows her lead, which means he has two wild girls scampering through his house, and while it makes it hard to get anything done considering he works from home, that would ultimately be *fine*, but—

Well, Billy *had* warned him about her tantrums.

Yesterday she had wanted to go out into the rain and play and splash in puddles before dinner. Steve had told her no because she didn't have a change of clothes and he also didn't want her getting sick.

One would have thought he'd taken the kitchen knife and run her through with it from the way that she screamed. She fell to the floor, begging Steve to let her go outside, her little fists and feet swinging and banging against the floor. It had taken him over an hour to completely console her, and after that she'd fallen asleep on the sofa with her thumb in her mouth. Hannah wouldn't even look at him, upset that he'd *hurt her friend*, even though he'd done no such thing.

Something told him the tantrum he'd witnessed was nothing like Billy had seen.

That being said, it still wasn't Steve's responsibility to take care of her, and it was getting to be an everyday thing. He can't help but wonder if Billy's doing it on purpose so he won't have to deal with her energy. Steve's fairly sure Billy hasn't completely wiped the slate clean on being an asshole, after all.

"—Harrington, *Harrington*," the little voice interrupts his thoughts. He looks in the rearview mirror and sees Katie raising her eyebrows at him. She looks like Billy, fuck. She *sounds* like Billy, *fuck*. "I'm hungry," she says.

"I was thinking tacos tonight," Steve offers. "You guys wanna help me make them?"

The girls light up. "Yeah!" they both say excitedly, hands lifting up above their heads.

Steve decides right then that Billy's not going to sit in his car and avoid him tonight. If he's going to put Steve in charge of this shit, then damn it, they're going to talk about it.

--

Steve has had the girls help him set up a taco bar on the countertop, all different toppings. Hannah is pleased because tacos are her favorite. Steve is just glad to have the distraction from the raging storm outside. The rain has picked up and is pelting the windows, thunder rumbling, and the lights flicker a little, and it makes him twitchy. He pours them glasses of Dr. Pepper and lets them have at it, even though his appetite has waned due to the weather.

He picks at his food, and Hannah is so used to his twitchiness that she doesn't even acknowledge it.

Katie is less used to it.

"Hey," she says with the loud deliberateness that only a five-year-old can muster. "Why are you being all weird?"

"I'm not being weird," Steve scoffs.

"You're always weird," Hannah says, grinning around a mouthful of tortilla.

"Don't talk with your mouth full, squirt," Steve says, ruffling her hair.

"You *are*," Hannah says, still with her mouth full.

"How was school?" Steve asks instead. "Anything cool happen today?"

"Yeah!" Hannah says, finally swallowing her bite. She's ecstatic, only suddenly remembering. "We had show and tell!"

Steve knows this, of course, because he helped Hannah pick out a thing to take after she lamented over it for half an hour. Every time they have show and tell, she has to bring the *perfect* thing. Her thing needs to be the *best* thing. She usually is trying to decide over a bunch of various, obscure objects that seem to have some deep, personal meaning to her. One time she took her hairbrush because Steve does her hair with it in the morning (she had come home crying that afternoon because one of the kids, some boy named Randy, had told her it was boring and it had hurt her feelings). She'd brought her copy of *Dirty Dancing* in another time, which was why Steve got judgmental looks from the entire PTA now. This time she'd brought her stuffed rabbit, whom she'd named Chunk after the character from *The Goonies*.

"Did Chunk like being showed off to the class?" Steve asks. He notices out of the corner of his eye that Katie is suddenly very quiet and sullen. Hannah does not notice it.

"Yes," she says, nodding. "The other kids said he was really cute, and

it made him really happy. All the kids except *Randy*.” She scrunches her nose up and grimaces at the name.

Steve kind of hates Randy. “What did Randy say?” Steve asks.

“He said that Chunk was dumb and that I was dumb for liking it,” she says, and God, her little heart breaks at the memory of it. He hopes that this is the worst heartbreak she’ll ever experience in her life, that it gets no worse than her stuffed bunny being called dumb. He knows it’s too much to hope for.

He also knows he really hates fucking *Randy*.

“What a jerk!” Steve says, and he’s not even phoning in his anger. “Chunk is the best!”

“He *is*!” Hannah says. “It’s okay though, Daddy. Katie told him if he called me dumb again she’d knock his teeth out. It was cool.”

His head whips over to Katie who is looking at her plate. She looks a combination of ashamed and smug about the whole situation, like she knows she’s in trouble but she feels vindicated anyway.

“Is that true, Katie?” Steve asks in his Dad Voice. “Did you threaten him?”

She meets his gaze, and he can see the storm brewing in her eyes. She’s ready to argue. “He started it,” she says, and then, “I didn’t hit him.”

“I know you didn’t hit him,” Steve says, “but you did threaten to, didn’t you?”

“The teacher didn’t hear!” she shouts, as if that makes it fine. Hannah looks suddenly conflicted. She doesn’t seem to understand why her Daddy and her friend are arguing. Steve knows that Hannah knows that hitting is a bad thing, but he guesses Katie’s convinced her that it doesn’t count when it’s Randy.

(He doesn’t like the small part of himself that agrees).

“I should’a hit him though,” Katie says when her line about the

teacher doesn't get her anywhere. "He's an asshole."

Hannah presses her lips together. She knows that's a bad word, and she never says it, but she seems to think Katie is cool because she does.

"Katie, you can't talk like that. You can't make threats, and you can't say asshole," Steve lectures as gently as possible.

"Why not?" she asks, and she's furious. He can see her fires lighting up and getting ready to burn. Dinner is about to go south. "*Why not?!*" she repeats.

"It's... it's not nice," Steve tries.

"I'm not nice!" she bellows, a force of nature. "I don't wanna be nice if it means he calls Hannah dumb! He got scared of me and almost peed. Why does he get to be mean but I have to be nice?! WHY?!" She bangs her fists on the table. She is raging. She is furious.

"Katie," Steve says slowly. "Calm down."

Katie picks up her plate and throws it. It crashes against the wall and shatters, sending porcelain and food everywhere. She stares right into Steve's face, defiant. Hannah starts crying.

The shame is definitely stronger than her defiance once she's upset Hannah, but she glares Steve down, her face coiled into a grimace and wet with tears. She's waiting, waiting for Steve to go off on her, to explode and send her away.

He doesn't. Instead, he goes to the broom closet and gets the broom and dustpan and brings it to her. "Sweep up the mess," he says, voice never changing from his calm, collected tone. "Then we're gonna talk about it, okay?"

He collects Hannah from her chair and carries her up to her room, coddling and shushing her until she calms down.

"I wanted her to hit him, Daddy," she confesses as he sits with her on her little bed. "He's so mean to me. I told the teacher and she just said that he likes me... If he likes me, then why is he so *mean*? I don't

like him. Please don't be mad at Katie, Daddy. Please."

He kisses the top of her hair. "I'm not mad," he says. "I'm just gonna talk to her, I promise. A little one-on-one like you and me do. Think you'll be okay up here by yourself for a minute?"

She sniffs, nods.

"Draw me a picture, okay?" Steve says. "When I come back you can show it to me."

"Okay," she says, looking up at him with her big, brown eyes.

Steve comes downstairs, and by the time he gets there he's already feeling livid. It's not at Katie though—he meant it when he said he wasn't mad at her. That doesn't mean the situation doesn't set his teeth to clenching though. He comes back into the kitchen and finds Katie doing exactly what she was asked, clumsily sweeping the plate into the dustpan and absolutely boo-hooing the whole way. Her face is red with her anguish, great big tears rolling down her little cheeks. Steve wants to call Billy, tell him to come and get her. He mostly just wants to deck him though because Steve shouldn't have to *call* him. He should already *be* here.

"Are you less mad now?" Steve asks, leaning against the doorway, going for casual. She responds with a wordless sob.

He sighs and goes to her, crouching down to help finish cleaning up the mess. He gets it tossed and puts the broom away, and then Katie's right there in front of him, and she's whimpering out, "I'm sorry I broke the plate..."

"It's okay," Steve says, squatting down to her level. "I forgive you. Now talk to me, okay?"

"I don't wanna," she says stubbornly, even as she wipes at her tears.

"I know, but hey, you might feel better if you do." It doesn't seem to inspire much confidence, so he sits down on the floor across from her. "You know why I was acting weird at dinner?"

She blinks, then shakes her head.

"I'm scared of storms," he says. "Give me the heebie jeebies."

It's not quite the truth, but as close as he's ever going to give her. The last thing either of these girls need is to know that monsters are real.

"Bet that's pretty weird, huh," he says. "Bet you didn't think adults could get scared."

"Dad gets scared all the time," Katie says immediately.

This conversation is derailing fast. Steve can't help himself. "What's your dad so scared of?"

She shrugs her shoulders, looks at the floor. "I dunno... When he gets mad, he looks real scared. Maybe he's scared'a me."

Steve's heart *aches*. He hates Billy so much.

"Does he... do anything bad when he gets scared?"

"He tells me I have to go to my room, and he gets real quiet after. He always cleans up the bad stuff I do, and he still kisses me goodnight, but it's so quiet and I *hate* it."

"Does he say he's gonna hit you? Like you did with Randy?"

"No... but I think he wants to sometimes. I wanna hit me too. I'm not very nice."

Steve sighs, long and sad, gestures with both hands towards himself. "Come on. Come here. Bring it in." She looks a little less brokenhearted as she moves into Steve's arms and lets him hug her. "You *are* nice, Katie. Being angry doesn't mean you're not nice."

She tucks her head against his chest and sniffles. Her hair smells like strawberries.

She's quiet for a minute or two before she says, voice watery, "I'm scared too."

"What are you scared of, Katie?"

“That everyone’s gonna leave an’ I’m gonna be all alone.”

Fuck.

Fuck, she’s too young to know that kind of fucking fear. Steve has to close his eyes against it and take a deep breath just to avoid full collapse.

“Why do you think everyone’s gonna leave you?”

“Because I’m so mad all the time, an’... an’ because Momma left even when I wasn’t mad all the time.”

Steve holds her a little closer, feeling protective. He realizes that maybe Katie’s monsters are real. They’re just all inside of her.

“Did you talk to your dad about how you feel about that?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk to Dad about sad stuff,” she mumbles. “He’s already so sad all the time. So tired and so mad. I just want him to be happy and make him smile a lot... He told me if a person is mean to me, if they hit me, I should hit them back. He said I should never let anyone hurt me. Hannah’s so nice, she won’t hit anyone. I’m not nice, so I can hit them for her. Someone should.”

Steve rests his cheek on the top of her head. “You shouldn’t hit anyone,” he says, “*unless* they hit you first, okay? Don’t start fights, but if you’re in one, finish it. You’ve probably got a good right hook. God knows your Dad did.” Steve can still remember the way his jaw throbbed, even ten years later.

She manages a smile. “Am I still in trouble?”

“Nah,” Steve says, releasing her so she can get up. “Just... if you’re feeling angry, come and find someone to talk to, okay? You don’t have to lash out. Talk to your dad. Talk to me. Let us help, okay?”

She gets back to her feet and turns around, and her smile is just like Billy’s. “You know, you’re alright, Harrington.”

Outside, there’s the sound of a honking horn. She looks towards the door and moves to get her backpack, but Steve stills her with his

hand. “Why don’t you go upstairs and tell Hannah goodnight first, hm?”

He waits until she’s disappeared down the upstairs hallway before he goes to the front door. He considers going out to the car, but he can hear the downpour still, and considering what Steve’s been through tonight, he thinks it’s fair to wait for the pounding on the door.

He waits another couple of seconds after the knocking to open it, trying to give off the illusion that he wasn’t standing there waiting. Billy looks like a drowned rat, his short blond curls sticking to his face, his leather jacket doing nothing to prevent the water soaking through the suit he’s wearing. Honestly the water is an improvement because the suit is fucking hideous. It doesn’t even fit him properly and looks like the cheapest thing in the store bought at the last minute. He glares at Steve in the glow of the porch light.

“Think it might rain?” Steve offers lightly.

Billy is unamused. “I honked.”

“I must not have heard it over the storm,” Steve says. “If you’d been here earlier before it got so bad, maybe I would’ve heard it.”

Billy works his jaw, runs his tongue along the top row of his teeth. “Alright, I get it. You’re pissed. Can I at least come inside and dry off?”

Steve steps aside and ushers him in, and Billy immediately sheds both his leather jacket and the suit jacket underneath it. The white shirt underneath is sticking to him and nearly translucent and Steve has to fight to hold onto his anger for a moment. He’s so easily distracted, he thinks.

“This is the third day in a row, you know,” Steve says, crossing his arms over his chest, trying not to act flustered as Billy tugs his tie loose from around his neck. Once he gets going though, it’s easy to find his rage, the words toppling out as fast as he can say them without getting tongue tied. “It’s the *third day* I’ve had to bring Katie home with me because you weren’t there. Do you know what you’re doing to her by doing that? She thinks that you don’t want her

around. Do you even realize that? Where the hell have you *been*, huh? What's so important that you keep leaving her here later and later every night? Are you just gonna ride off into the sunset one day like you did back in high school and have her never see you again?"

Steve sees Billy growing more and more irritated by the line of questioning, but he shows a lot more restraint than he did when he was younger. He's definitely been practicing. When he turns to face Steve, he's clearly agitated, but he doesn't blow up. In fact, he just sort of... implodes inward, or at least that's what it looks like from Steve's end. Billy goes from agitated, to angry, to just... exhausted. He scrubs his hands over his face, and he sighs, and he says, "Look, you want the truth? Well, Harrington, here's the fucking truth. I lost my job, so I've been going to interviews and shit."

Aw, fuck. Fuck. Steve feels like a piece of shit. A completely justified piece of shit.

"What?" is the only thing Steve can muster up to say.

Billy grits his teeth and runs his hand through his hair, and he's clearly, *clearly* uncomfortable. "Yeah, I fucked up, alright? I said the wrong thing to the wrong customer and I got the ax. I didn't want her to know because then she'd worry... and at least here I knew she'd have a hot meal to eat for dinner."

"Okay... so you don't tell her. I get that. Why didn't you tell me?"

There's heat in Billy's cheeks. He won't look at him. "I don't need your fucking pity, Harrington, and I don't need you worrying about me either."

All of Steve's anger is gone, just like that. Like a light switch has been flipped off. Billy looks so tired, and he looks hungry, and even though he doesn't want or need Steve's pity and worry, he's getting it anyway. It's just something Steve does.

(And he thinks that maybe Billy wants him to worry a little bit, even if he says he doesn't).

"When's the last time *you* had a hot meal, huh?" Steve asks.

Billy doesn't say anything, so Steve rolls his eyes, plants a hand between Billy's very wet shoulder blades, and pushes him into the kitchen. He forces him to sit, then fixes him a plate of leftover tacos. Billy stares at the food as if Steve has placed the Holy Grail in front of him. "Dude," he says.

"Eat," Steve says, "and for fuck's sake talk to me."

So Billy does.

He tells Steve about how he's been doing some mechanic work in town for the last couple of months. It didn't pay that well, but it's enough to survive off of and it's something he's good at. A customer had come a few weeks ago and had told Billy he was a friend of the owner, so he didn't have to pay full price for the work Billy had done on his piece-of-shit Ford. Billy had basically told him he was full of shit and to get the fuck out. Turned out, the customer was telling the truth about being friends with the owner, and Billy's boss got pissed. Billy had tried to explain that he wasn't about to just take some asshole's word for it and cost him money, but, according to Billy, the guy was a real hard-ass "just like my Dad" and fired him anyway.

"It was fucking *bullshit*," Billy says, and even years later that word still stings Steve a little bit, even when it's not directed at him. Billy talks with his mouth full, just like Hannah does, but Steve doesn't tell him to stop because he thinks there's probably no point. He's gone from dripping to damp now, his curls curling tighter and frizzing at the ends. "You got beer?"

"Nope," Steve says.

Billy rolls his eyes. "Whatever. Okay, so, anyway, I get fired, and I'm like fuck. I'm fucked. I even begged this guy, Harrington. I told him I've got a kid, I've gotta take care of her. I fucking begged him like a fucking pussy, and he still fired me. It's... hard for me to get work, alright? Especially here. I already had a bad reputation around here and small-town people don't forget shit like that. Then add that I've got a fucking record and no one will hire me." Billy sags in his chair, and he looks too tired to keep being angry about it.

"You have a record?" Steve asks, even though he figures he probably

shouldn't. It's not like it's any of his business.

"Are you honestly surprised, man? Come on," Billy says flatly.

Steve's really pushing it, he knows. "What did you do?"

Billy drops his chin into his palm, takes another bite of food because he apparently can't say anything without food in his mouth. "Katie's mom had a problem with heroin. *Has* a problem with heroin, actually. I never touched the shit, but I got caught with some of it in my car. Plus, got a couple of charges for assault because of some fighting in a couple'a bars."

"Did you ever hit Katie's mom?"

Now Steve's just asking for a beating.

Billy glares at Steve, chews slowly the whole time he does it, then swallows abruptly. "No," he says sharply. "I may be shit at a bunch of stuff, but I don't hit girls. I'm trying really fucking hard not to hit *anyone* these days, but I never hit a woman. At least that's one thing I do better than my deadbeat dad."

"So... you lost your job," Steve says, coaxing him to continue. "Then...?"

"What do you mean 'then'? Then *this*. The monkey suit, the interviews. Putting my resumes on desks in fucking small-town Hawkins. I've probably tried everywhere in fucking town. The closest I've gotten to something is being a bartender at the local dive, but I can't. That's all at night and I can't leave Katie at home by herself. Plus, I'd never get to see her, so... fuck that."

Oh, Steve *aches*. God, how he *aches*. He can't help it. He's tender-hearted. It's always been his downfall.

He thinks, at least, that his tender heart could have a solution though. "What if I told you I could make one phone call and get you some work?"

Billy looks him in the face, pushing his empty plate away from himself and digging out his cigarettes. "I'd say you're full of shit, but

I'm listening."

"I know someone who's looking for help," Steve says. "Probably doesn't pay that much, but it's a day job, and there's probably some room for growth too."

Billy places a cigarette between his lips, lets it dangle unlit. "Okay, so... call them. I'll literally do anything at this point, man, my pantry is fucking empty. I've had cereal for dinner the last four nights."

"I don't do shit for free, Billy," Steve says.

"I literally just told you my pantry is empty, Harrington, I've got nothing to offer—"

"I don't need your money," Steve interrupts. "You just have to make a promise. And keep it."

Billy lights the cigarette, doesn't bother to ask if it's okay if he can smoke in Steve's house. Steve doesn't bother to tell him it isn't. "Okay... so, what's the promise?"

"You have to promise to talk to Katie," he says firmly. "Even when she's upset. *Especially* when she's upset, Billy."

Billy does that thing again, the thing he did in the car where he doesn't move but he feels suddenly further away. He's really good at it.

Steve is undeterred. "She's having a hard time. You know that. We both know that. She's trying really hard, but she's struggling, and she doesn't want you to know because she's afraid that she's going to hurt you. She thinks you're afraid of her because you fucking shut down whenever she goes into one of her fits. I know what you're trying to do by doing that, okay, I know that you're just trying to keep your anger in check, but it's not the solution either, man."

"What'd she do?" Billy asks, slightly accusatory. He's defensive, and Steve isn't exactly surprised.

"She threatened to hit a kid at school because he called Hannah and Chunk dumb."

“Chunk?”

“The stuffed rabbit. His name is Chunk.”

“Oh.”

Steve is silent for a beat, waiting for Billy to say more. He doesn't.

“Billy,” Steve says, eyebrows going up and lips thinning in frustration. “You're pretty chill about your daughter making threats.”

Billy shrugs. “Sounds like the kid was an asshole. Sounds to me like she wasn't making threats, she was just defending her friend.”

“And what if she did hit him?”

“Then... he'd learn not to mess with her,” Billy says, grins smugly.

“*Then* she gets in trouble with the teacher, Billy, and worse, she learns that lashing out is a way to deal with her anger. I'm not saying she doesn't need to defend herself or Hannah, but... didn't we just talk about this in your car on Parents' Day? You know, how you were saying that burning out doesn't actually fix anything? That you didn't want her to end up like—”

Billy looks up.

“Like that,” Steve finishes, rather than his original thought *like you*.

Billy drags on his cigarette, lets the smoke trail out of his mouth.

“So... what. You want me to talk to her?” Billy asks, and his voice is softer and more hesitant than before. He's still defensive, but...

“That's what I did,” Steve says, folding his arms on the table. “She got upset and she threw a fit and a plate. I made her clean up her mess, and I made her talk to me. She apologized, and she told me that she doesn't think she's a nice person. She said she thought you wanted to hit her sometimes and that you were scared of her.”

Billy shudders minutely. An untrained eye wouldn't have seen it, but Steve's watching him closely. He can see the words pressing against

Billy's teeth, the urge to lash out and say he would *never* hit her. Steve already knows he wouldn't. Billy just feels like he's failed by giving her even the inkling that he might.

"She's scared too," Steve continues. "She's scared that she's gonna end up all alone. She doesn't want to lose you to this... fire she's got in her. She doesn't want to burn out, I know she doesn't. She just doesn't know what to do because she's just a kid, and she thinks it's her responsibility to deal with it on her own and it's *not*. You're her father, Billy. You gotta take on the load. It's too heavy for her. I know it's hard, and I know you've got a load on you too, but... you have to."

Billy tears his gaze away. His cigarette is burning between his fingers, but he doesn't even seem to remember it's there. His jaw is working, the fingers of his free hand fidgeting on the table, picking at the placemat. Steve can see the gears turning, can see Billy *trying* not to get caught up in the part of him that thinks he's already failed just because he's made a mistake. He looks like he's about to crack in fucking two.

Steve takes a chance.

He reaches out and grabs Billy's hand, stilling it on the table, squeezing it. He hopes it grounds him in reality. "Let me help," Steve says. "I know you've been avoiding me, alright? And like, we don't have to talk about what happened that day now or even ever again, but don't shut me out too. I want to help, okay? Not out of pity, but because of Hannah. She thinks Katie hung the moon, so I know she's not going anywhere anytime soon. Just... you've got a lot on your plate, so maybe you need someone to share the load, right? So you can deal with this other stuff. Because you *have* to deal with it, y'know?"

Billy looks Steve in the face, his expression long-suffering, as if to say he has been dealing with it forever when really all Billy's done is exist in the same space with it. It's not the same thing, but Steve knows Billy's got to figure that out on his own.

"So?" Steve asks. "Do you promise?"

Billy stares at their connected hands. He doesn't pull away which is promising.

"Do you *promise*?" Steve asks again.

"I promise," Billy mumbles. Then, "Maybe I do need a little help, I guess..."

Steve is satisfied with that at least. "Good," he says. "Us single dads gotta stick together, you know? The moms at the PTA already hate me, after all."

"Really? They just wanna bang me," Billy says, and his eyes light up and for a moment he looks like he's seventeen again, and Steve... Steve melts. Just a little. Fuck.

"Whatever," Steve says, letting go of Billy's hand and getting to his feet to clear the table, pretending all the way that he doesn't feel colder without the slide of Billy's fingers against his own.

"I'm the hot dad," Billy says, leaning back in his chair, smiling, and Steve hopes it's not his imagination that there's a little longing in his face too. "Face it, Harrington. You know it's true."

"Are you trying to get me to compliment you while you're wearing that hideous suit? Because it's not gonna happen."

"It's the only suit I could afford, and I look good in anything."

"Not in that suit."

"You want me to take it off?"

There's an awkward moment of Eye Contact. Billy had meant it in jest, obviously, but yeah, Steve kind of does want him to take it off.

He doesn't say that though.

"I'll lend you a suit," Steve offers instead. "I've got some nice ones. You and I are pretty close to the same size, I think. At least close enough."

“Am I gonna need a suit for this magic job you’re gonna pull out of your ass for me, Harrington?”

“Maybe,” Steve says and puts the plate in the dishwasher. “I’ll have to ask.”

“You gonna tell me what the job is?”

“Not until I know for sure it’s available.”

“You made me promise on a ‘maybe’?”

“Maybe.”

Now it’s Steve’s turn to grin smugly. Billy takes it in stride though, dropping his cigarette butt into the garbage can. He follows Steve through the house and up the stairs to go and fetch Katie and take her home, only to find that she and Hannah are both asleep on Hannah’s twin bed, Chunk settled between them.

They both stand there in silence for a moment or two, Billy watching the kids, Steve watching Billy. Billy’s expression is softer. The guilt still hangs on him even now. “How do I tell her I’m sorry?” he asks Steve quietly so as not to disturb them.

“You say ‘I’m sorry’,” Steve says bluntly. “It’s not that complicated. She’s five.”

Billy sighs. Steve kind of wants to reach out and ruffle his hair like he does with Hannah, but he thinks that’s probably a bad idea.

“Why don’t you guys just stay here tonight? I’ve got a guest room and some pajamas,” Steve says instead.

Billy looks like he might consider it before he shakes his head. “No can do, amigo.” He doesn’t say why.

He goes to the bed and wakes Katie, and as soon as she sees it’s her dad, she lights up, arms wrapping around his neck as he lifts her off the bed. “You ready to go, kid?” he asks.

“Mm-hmm,” she says, voice still heavy with sleep. She appears to be

already going back to it with her head on Billy's shoulder. "I missed you, Dad."

"I missed you too," Billy says, ever softer.

On the way out the door, Billy shoulders Katie's backpack and collects his two jackets over his one arm. Katie is sleeping soundly on his shoulder, arms still wrapped around his neck. He turns around to say something to Steve as Steve gets the door and they almost collide and—fuck—

Steve's hand is on Billy's chest. He can feel the warmth of his skin through the damp fabric of his shirt. With the tie loose and the first few buttons undone (when had he done *that?*), Steve can see Billy still wears the same necklace he wore every day in high school. He wonders what the significance of it is. He wonders what it would be like to watch it dangle in front of his face while they—

Shit, Steve really hasn't gotten laid in a while.

"Have a good night," Steve says stiffly and shows them out.

The rain has stopped, leaving the streets sleek and shiny, reflecting the lights of the neighbors' houses. Steve watches Billy put Katie in the backseat, watches him cover her up with his leather jacket. Watches, waves, and he thinks.

I am so fucked.

Author's Note:

i'm on [tumblr](#)